CHAPTER 1

COMPOSITION

Overview

Introduction

The greatest power of visual language lies in its immediacy. You see content and form simultaneously. Properly developed and composed, visual messages enter the brain directly without conscious decoding, translating, or delay.   The message conveyed is not only a direct result of your ability to orderly arrange the elements or visual syntax in a composition, but also the receiver's ability to perceive, or his level of visual literacy. Your manipulation of negative and positive space, tonal patterns, and implied spatial relationships as elements on a page is an intellectual problem-solving process. The cerebral process of generalities without concrete rules that compose abstract visual syntax is a uniquely human ability the computer has not yet mastered. Effective compositions require understanding the dynamics of visual patterns and how we see, organize, and define those elements intellectually, emotionally, and mechanically.

Objectives

The material in this chapter enables you to do the following:

- Understand the importance of developing comprehensive thumbnail sketches.

- Differentiate between formal and informal arrangements.

- Use the elements of design to create disturbing or discordant compositions.

- Use the elements of design to create balanced and pleasing compositions.

- Understand the difference between color and tonal compositions.

- Recognize the implications of the compositional elements of one-, two-, and three-point perspective drawings.

- Use composition advantageously in technical drawings or blueprints.

Overview, Continued

Acronyms   The following table contains a list of acronyms you must know to understand the material in this chapter:

Acronym	Meaning
ANSI	American National Standards Institute
ASME	American Society of Mechanical Engineers
CAD	Computer-Aided Drafting
DOD	Department of Defense
LH	Left Hand
MIL-STD	Military Standard
NEXT ASS'Y	Next Assembly
RH	Right Hand

In this chapter   This chapter covers the following topics:

Preliminary Information

Introduction   Before beginning new projects, gather all pertinent information. Weed through the data to eliminate nonessential items. Determine the main message and focus all other material in the composition to reenforce that message.

KISS   KISS is the acronym for keep it simple, stupid. We call this the principle of simplicity and clarity. Picasso epitomized the search for simplistic communication in twentieth century art. Because he was a contemporary and prolific multi-media artist, you can trace the evolution of Picasso's struggle for simplicity.   Study Picasso's early work and you will find a traditional academic art foundation. In his later work you will find his technique is simplistic yet sophisticated. Use the KISS principle to pare down information to the basic intended message.

Incidental material   Once you select the subject for a picture, choose all secondary elements based on how well they support the main topic. Limit your selection to those elements that contribute the most to understanding the subject.

Attitude or impression   Know the attitude or impression the originator wants to convey. Dynamic compositions are inappropriate for funerals and weddings. Solemn compositions are not effective in festive applications. Some originators want to impress potential clients with their elegance, others like crass or brusque designs. Attitude affects composition. Decisions regarding object size, location, and arrangement, color, texture, and perspective should be made in the preliminary composition, before beginning the final artwork. This strategy allows you to anticipate and compensate for any unexpected impediments before committing man-hours and materials.

Text   Consider text or lettering as an integral part of design. Lettering is part of an overall composition and should be planned as carefully as you plan the composition.

End product   Consider how the product will be presented to an audience. Will the image be a painting, photograph, printed material, poster, slide, or flyer? The final form of an image determines to a large extent how you create it.

Thumbnail Sketches

Introduction   Thumbnail sketches are small, roughly drawn images quickly committed to paper. Drawn effortlessly and in rapid succession, they appear as nothing more than doodles to untrained eyes. Thumbnail sketches are, in fact, the most efficient mode of illustrative brainstorming and a source of potentially rich fodder for subsequent finished imagery. Thumbnail sketches are referred to throughout each volume in the Illustrator Draftsman (DM) training series.

The purpose of thumbnail sketches   Use thumbnail sketches to develop the most effective layout, balance, tone, shading, and color palettes. Working out image tonal areas, color, and shadings before committing yourself to finished media saves time and materials.


Before the thumbnail sketch   Before you can begin thumbnail sketching, assemble the information that applies to the finished illustration. Have the job order handy and refresh your memory on the originators intended message or impression. If sketching out personal creative endeavors, think about what you want the images to say. Clarify the intended message and select the best way of saying it.

Making thumbnail sketches   With a pencil, lay out several squares approximating the desired proportions of the finished image. Use the principles of composition covered in this chapter to lay out a series of drawings. Experiment with different placements of the elements, patterns, tones, and colors. Select the most successful thumbnail sketch to base the layout of the final illustration.

Figure 1-1 shows a series of thumbnail sketches.
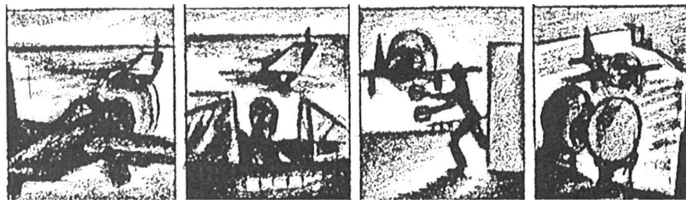
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Figure 1-1.-Thumbnail sketches.

Compositional Elements

Introduction A synergetic combination of compositional elements produces images that communicate volumes without written words. Images that fail to elicit appropriate responses usually lack some element of composition. Although there are no absolute rules on composition, we can generalize regarding psychophysiological reactions of perception to combinations of compositional elements.

Compositional elements The basic elements of good composition include the picture area, picture depth, line movement, value, proportion, balance, unity, and clarity.

Picture area or picture plane The picture area or picture plane is the amount of surface available to hold an image. The picture area is also synonymous with image area, the area enclosed by the edges of the paper or substrate surface. The size of the picture area influences the size of the objects you depict in the image. You can use size or relative size and location, as well as the overlapping of objects in the picture area to emphasize or subdue importance. Large objects or objects placed in the foreground tend to become more important. Similarly sized and placed objects become monotonous. Overlapping emphasizes main objects while partially obscuring secondary objects.

Figure 1-2 shows three objects in three different compositions.
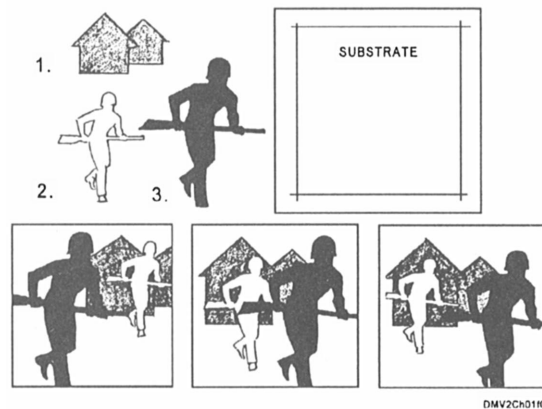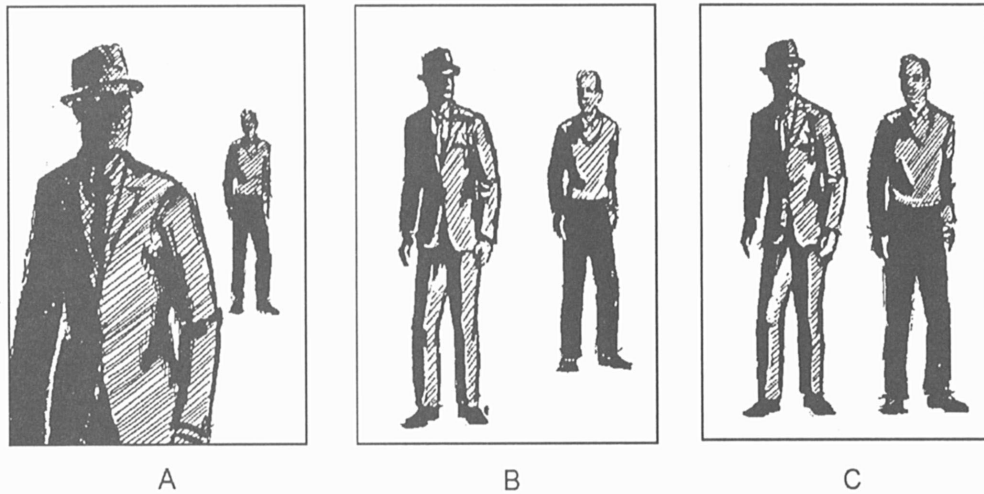

Figure 1-2.—Three objects in three different compositions.

Compositional Elements, Continued

Picture area or picture plane (Continued)

Figure 1-3 shows relative sizes of figures in a picture area.

A. FIGURE IN FOREGROUND COMPLETELY OVERWHELMS DISTANT FIGURE.

B. THOUGH NOT SO GREAT A DISTANCE BETWEEN FIGURES, FIGURE IN FOREGROUND STILL DOMINATES PICTURE AREA.

C. HERE NEITHER FIGURE IS DOMINANT BECAUSE OF DISTANCE, BUT FIGURES THE SAME SIZE SHOULD BE USED ONLY IF SITUATION PERMITS: THIS ARRANGEMENT COULD BECOME MONOTONOUS.
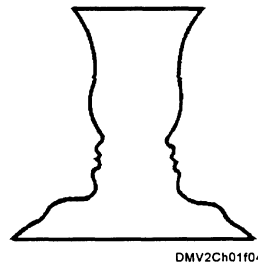
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Figure 1-3.—Relative figural size.

Compositional Elements, Continued

Picture area or picture plane (Continued)

Space inside the picture area exists as positive or negative space. Objects that dominate the eye occupy positive space. The space remaining is negative space. Most pictures offer a primary object as a positive subject presenting a complimentary design. Positive and negative space have nothing to do with darkness or lightness or mirror images as they do in photographic media. Beginning DMs usually concentrate on positive space and neglect negative space. Failure to understand the terms positive and negative space results in overcrowded, confusing images.

Figure 1-4 shows an example of positive and negative space. Is the image you initially see profiles or a goblet?
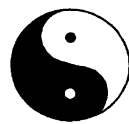
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Figure 1-4.
—Positive and
negative space.

Equal areas of positive and negative spaces create ambiguity. This contrast competes for dominance and presents an unresolved visual state or conflict.

Figure 1-5 show the Chinese symbol, yin-yang. The symbol, a close balance of a positive-negative visual state, is unresolved, leaving the impression of constant moving or fluidity.

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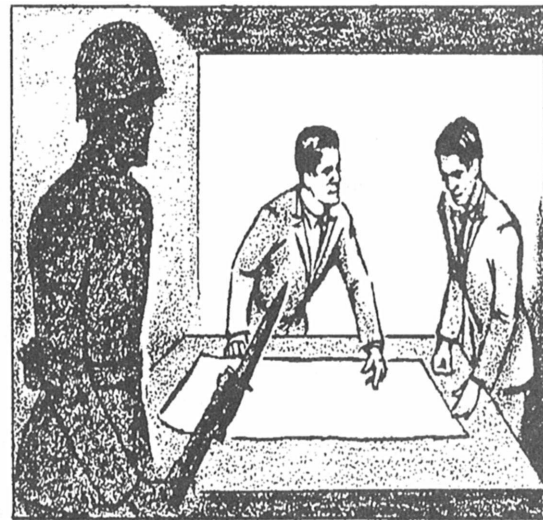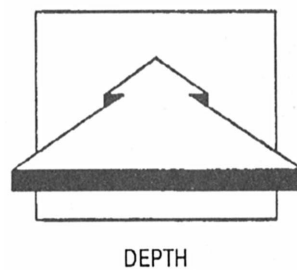
Figure 1-5.
—The
Chinese
symbol of
yin-yang.

Compositional Elements, Continued

Picture depth or perspective

Picture depth or perspective is the assimilation of three-dimensions on a two-dimensional plane (paper or substrate). The suggestion of depth makes scenes appear more realistic. You can control the illusion of depth in picture areas by overlapping objects, using different sized objects, cropping closely into scenes, or by using common props and directional lines to direct viewers into the image. Linear and aerial (one-, two-, and three-point) perspective are covered later in this volume. All of these methods should compliment each other to form interesting compositions. Unless there is special reason - for doing so, never place objects in a line or row, crowd them into a half or a quarter of the picture area, or regularly arrange different illustrations in the same design. Placing objects in varied and interesting patterns prevents compositions from becoming stale and monotonous.

Figure 1-6 illustrates the use of a prop to create picture depth.

DEPTH

CREATING DEPTH USING THE RECEDING TABLE AND OVERHEAD LINE,
THE LINE OF THE RIFLE AND BAYONET LEADS TO A CENTRAL FIGURE

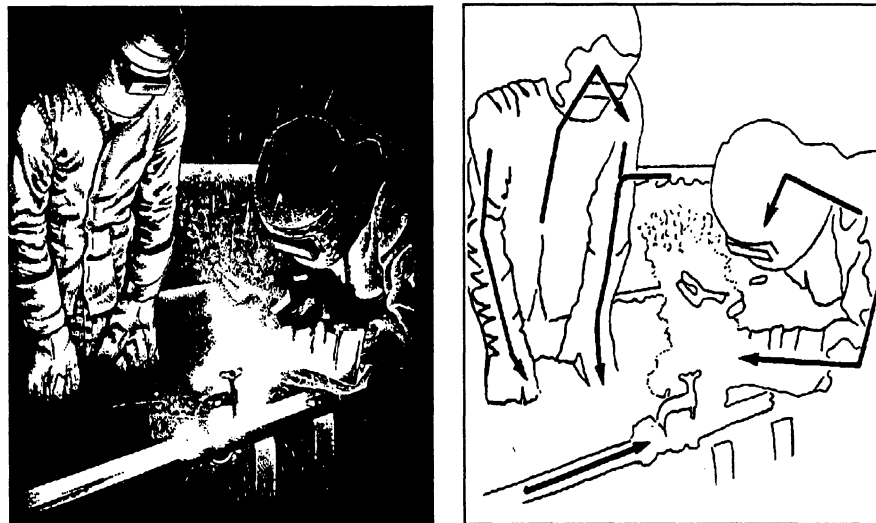DMV2Ch01f06

Figure 1-6.—Creating depth using props.

Compositional Elements, Continued

Line movement   The term "line movement" refers to the direction that the viewer's eyes move within the picture area, called *directional lines,* and lines that suggest attitudes or emotion, *emotive lines.*

DIRECTIONAL LINES: Directional lines should always lead the viewer to see what you want him to see.   Directional lines are created by arranging objects so that the outlines of the main objects lead to the intended action or center of interest. Directional lines may move smoothly and rhythmetically from one object to another, grouping and relating objects that belong together. The movement could also be abrupt, creating lines that clash. This latter method is appropriate when drawing scenes of violence, conflict, or stress. Review your thumbnail sketches. Evaluate which of the sketches have directional lines that successfully lead the viewer into the picture area. Do not allow linear backgrounds or foregrounds to compete or interfere with the center of interest.   Avoid crowding lines or having lines spaced at equal intervals.

Figure 1-7 shows directional lines.

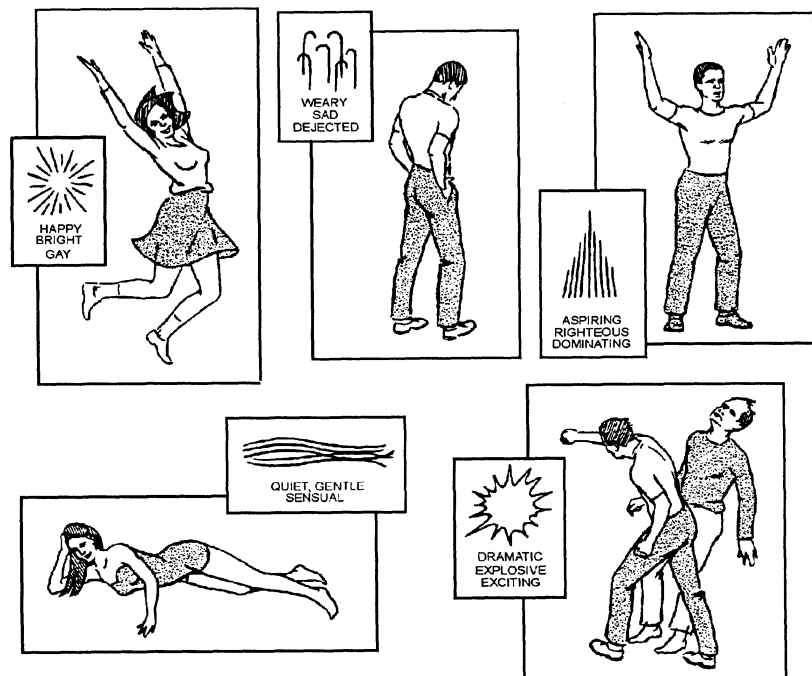DMV2Ch01f07

Figure 1-7.—Directional lines.

Line movement (Continued)

EMOTIVE LINES: Emotive lines are lines in the picture area that suggest emotions or attitudes. Vertical, diagonal, horizontal, and curved lines create different moods. Vertical lines suggest strength, rigidity, and power. Horizontal lines are associated with peace, tranquility, and quietness, while diagonal lines represent movement, action, and speed. Closely associated with figures and objects in the picture area, emotive lines provoke an overall mood to images. Do not confuse the purpose of directional and emotive lines.

Use vertical picture area formats for images containing predominantly vertical lines. Horizontal formats are best used for images containing predominantly horizontal lines.

Figure 1-8 shows the use of emotive lines.

Figure 1-8.—Emotive lines.

Compositional Elements, Continued

Value
Value is the overall pattern of lightness or darkness in pictures. Value within a picture should be consistent. Viewers are attracted to areas with the greatest contrast in values. If an object is surrounded by values that are nearly the same as its own value, the object will not attract much attention. The basic value patterns of most pictures fit one of the following four patterns: (1) light against dark, (2) dark against light, (3) dark and halftone against light, and (4) light and dark against halftone. Decide on a value pattern before making thumbnail sketches. If you change value patterns, do another thumbnail sketch and select the one that offers the best value composition.

Figure 1-9 displays the four basic value patterns.

(1) LIGHT AGAINST DARK

(2) DARK AGAINST LIGHT

(3) HALFTONE AND DARK AGAINST LIGHT

(4) LIGHT AND DARK AGAINST HALFTONE
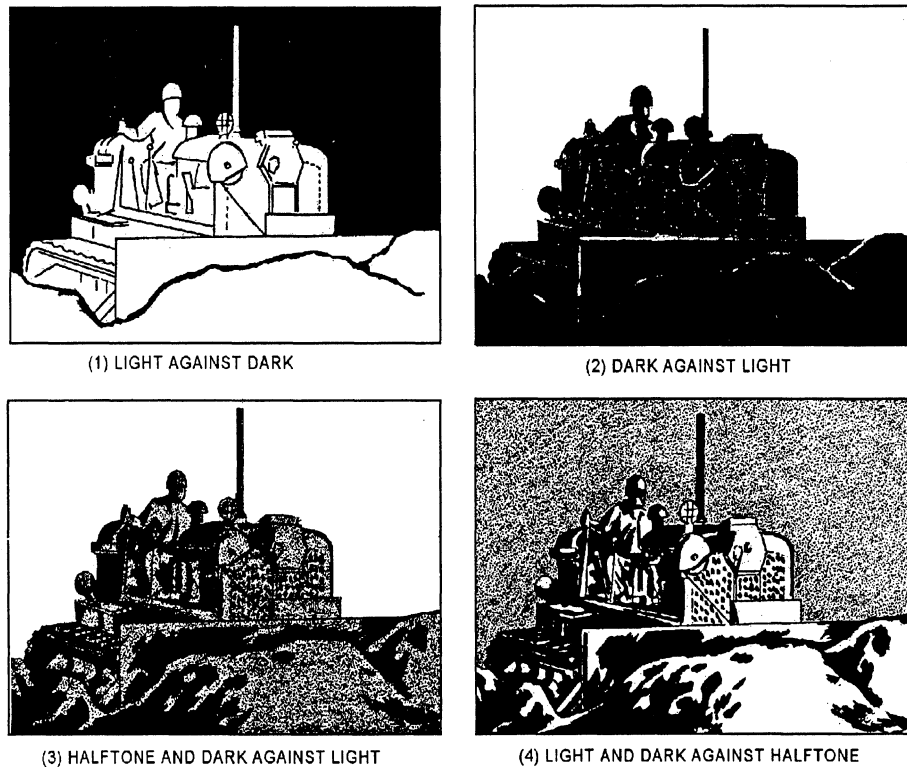
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Figure 1-9.—Basic value patterns.
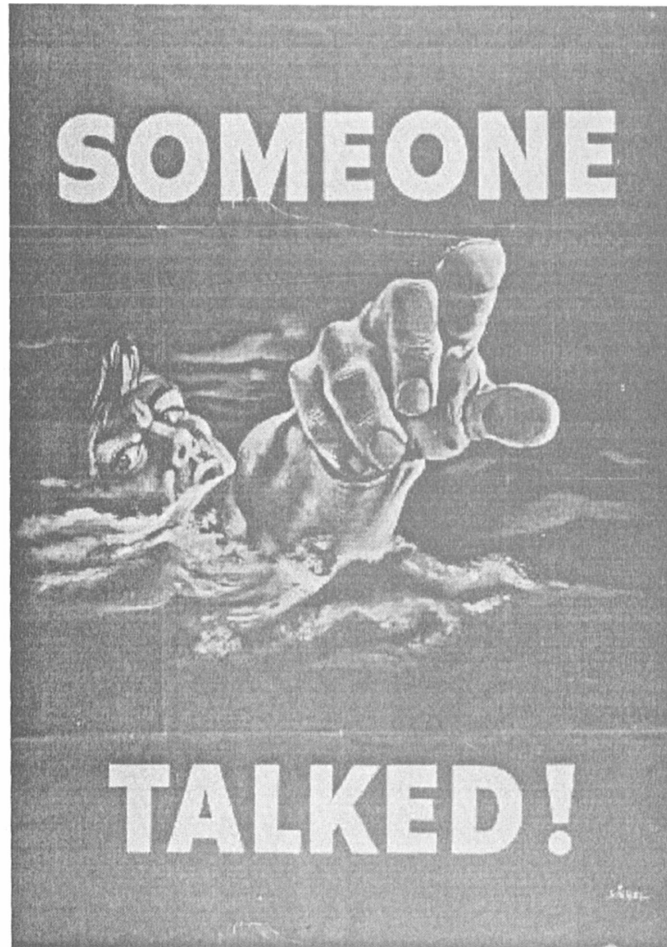
Compositional Elements, Continued

Value (Continued)

Within the value pattern of a picture area, objects and their surroundings have individual values that contribute to moods or atmosphere. When scenes contain predominantly dark tones or colors, it is called *low key*. Low-key imagery suggests seriousness, drama, and mystery and is often used in pictures of horror. Scenes containing mostly light tones are called *high key*. High-key imagery creates feelings of delicacy or lightness.

Figure 1-10 is a low-key image.

WW II POSTER FOR U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE

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Figure 1-10.—A low-key image.

Compositional Elements,

**Value
(Continued)**

Figure 1-11 is a high-key image.

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Figure 1-11.—A high-key image.

Compositional Elements, Continued

Value (Continued)

Textures possess value and enhance emotional expression. Loosely drawn textures have a lighter overall value than dense textures. We equate certain textural appearances with tactile sensations. Texture can also imply picture depth. Fine details suggest nearness, while blurred textures denote distance. Texture can be actual, simulated, or abstract and used to describe objects, stimulate tactile responses, clarify spatial relationships, affect object dominance, and enrich the picture areas.

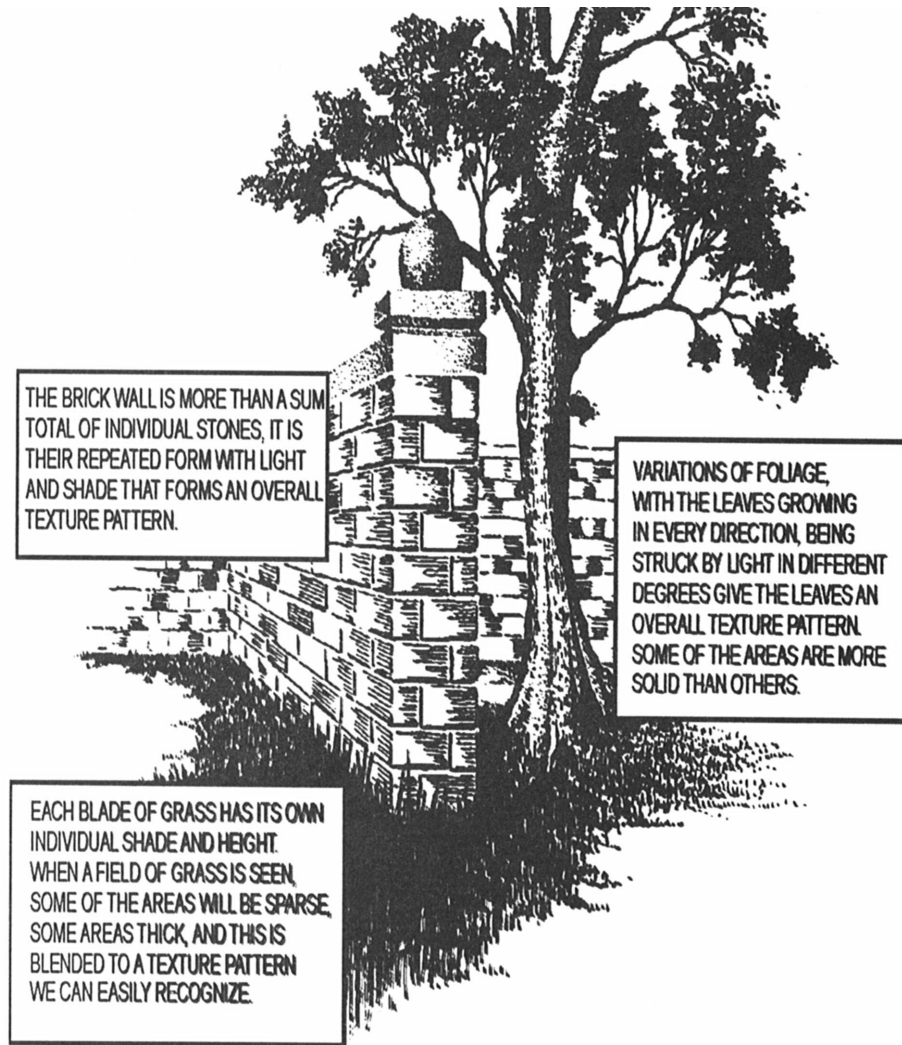Figure 1-12 shows how the density of a textural area determines its value.

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Figure 1-12.—Value determined by texture.

Compositional Elements, Continued

**Value
(Continued)**

Figure 1-13 is an image based primarily on texture.

THE BRICK WALL IS MORE THAN A SUM TOTAL OF INDIVIDUAL STONES, IT IS THEIR REPEATED FORM WITH LIGHT AND SHADE THAT FORMS AN OVERALL TEXTURE PATTERN.

VARIATIONS OF FOLIAGE, WITH THE LEAVES GROWING IN EVERY DIRECTION, BEING STRUCK BY LIGHT IN DIFFERENT DEGREES GIVE THE LEAVES AN OVERALL TEXTURE PATTERN. SOME OF THE AREAS ARE MORE SOLID THAN OTHERS.

EACH BLADE OF GRASS HAS ITS OWN INDIVIDUAL SHADE AND HEIGHT. WHEN A FIELD OF GRASS IS SEEN, SOME OF THE AREAS WILL BE SPARSE, SOME AREAS THICK, AND THIS IS BLENDED TO A TEXTURE PATTERN WE CAN EASILY RECOGNIZE.

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Figure 1-13.—Texture used to imply imagery.

Compositional Elements, Continued

Value
(Continued)

Color contrast is an effective compositional element just as tone is in black-and-white compositions. Colors with opposite characteristics contrast strongly when placed together. Each contrasting color accentuates the qualities of the other and makes images stand out dramatically. You can enhance the effects of color contrast by contrasting detail against mass.

Unfortunately, color also deceives. People gravitate toward color and relate to color more easily than black-and-white. Colors may have different hues but same or similar tonal values. Same or similar tonal values blend together in subsequent black-and-white reproduction, rendering the hues indistinguishable.

To evaluate the effectiveness of color compositions, imagine the image in black-and-white and apply the general rules of composition. Here are some general guidelines regarding color in compositions:

● Cool colors (bluish) and warm colors (reddish) almost always contrast.

● Cool colors recede, warm colors advance.

● Light colors contrast against dark colors.

● Bold colors offset weak colors.

● Colors may be different in hue but the same in tonal representation.

● Colors may be different in hue but the same in intensity.

● Color intensity or saturation determines tonal representations.

● Colors may be of the same hue but different in intensity and tonal representation.

Compositional Elements, Continued

Proportion

Proportion in composition involves the division of information into units within the picture area. For example, rectangular picture areas can be divided into different segments to lend more interest to compositions. Some segments may contain illustrations, other segments may contain text. Notice that dividing a picture area into equal segments is less interesting than those segments of unequal area.

Figure 1-14 shows a rectangular picture area divided into segments.
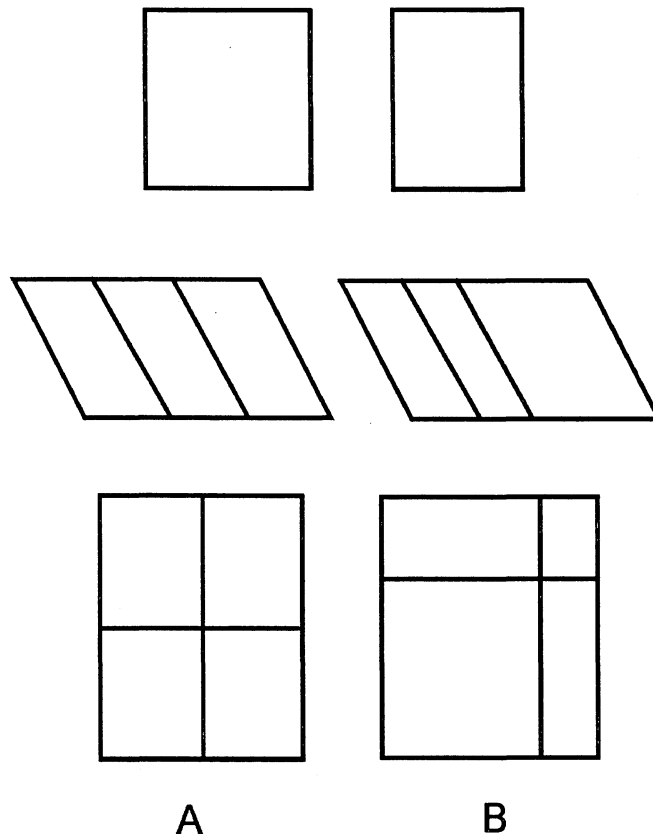
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Figure 1-14.—Proportional divisions of a: A. Square; and B. Rectangle.
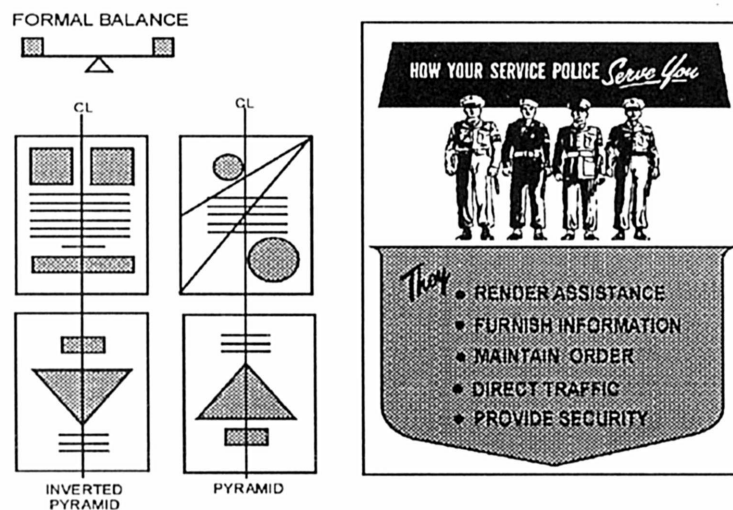
Compositional Elements, Continued

Balance   Balance is the visual perception of how information sits on a page.   Images should have balance in shapes, masses, tonal areas, and colors. Combinations of these elements imply a visual weight that anchors your attention. Disproportionately weighted images leave veiwers feeling off balanced. A balanced picture area presents information without creating discord.   Unbalanced presentations leave the viewer feeling as if something is wrong in the image.   Three general classifications of balance are symmetrical and asymmetrical, commonly referred to as formal and informal balance respectively, and radial balance.

FORMAL BALANCE: Formal or symmetrical balance results when each object is placed squarely on an imaginary vertical centerline, or by duplicating on one side each mass, shape, or line that appears on the other side of an imaginary vertical centerline.   Formal balance is also the result of structuring the elements in the picture area to resemble a pyramid or inverted pyramid.   In formal balance, the weight on the left side of the picture area should balance the weight on the right side and the bottom half should balance the top half.

Figure 1-15 shows examples of formal balance structures.

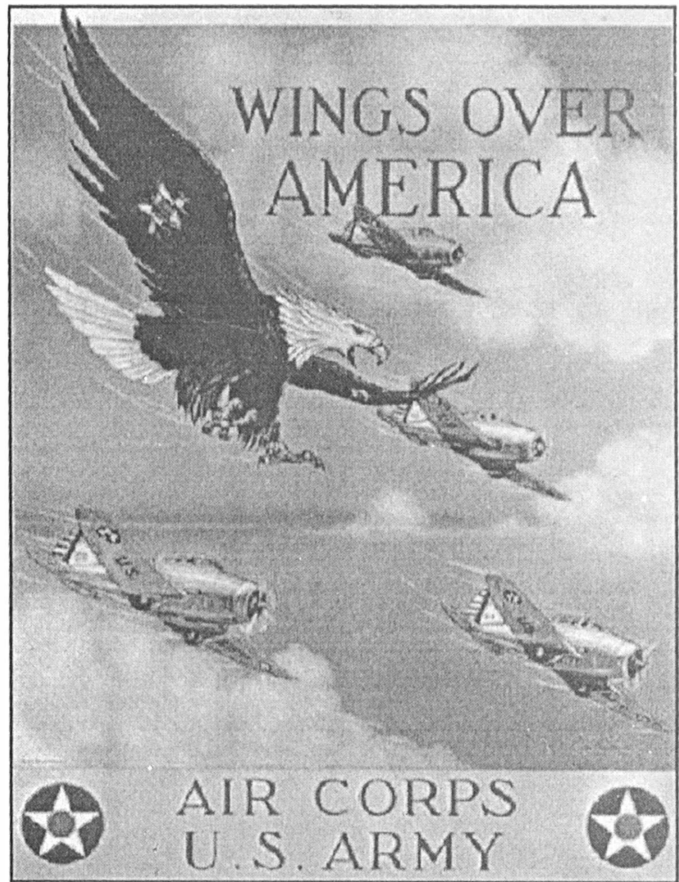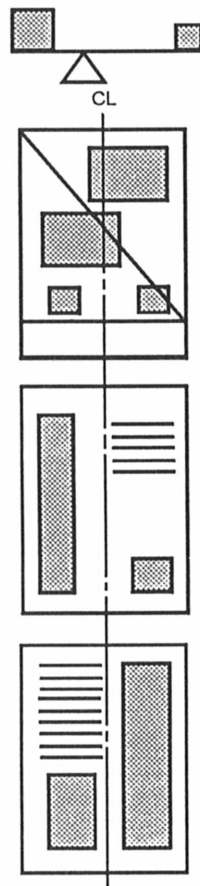**Figure 1-15.**—Examples of formal balance.

Compositional Elements, Continued

Balance (Continued)

INFORMAL BALANCE: Informal balance or asymmetrical balance is the placing of unlike elements on either side of an imaginary vertical centerline in an asymmetrical manner that results in each side of the picture area visually appearing equally weighted. The use of informal balance permits greater variety and design; however, the problem of balance becomes more complex. The left side of the picture area should still balance the right side and the bottom half should still balance the top half. When using informal balance, no mathematical rules apply, you must use your instincts.

Figure 1-16 is an example of informal balance.

Figure 1-16.—Informal balance.

Compositional Elements, Continued

Balance (Continued)

RADIAL BALANCE: Radial balance is a circular arrangement of two or more elements around a center point. Radial balance is a modified form of symmetrical balance. When placed around a common center point, elements of equal strength or weight appear balanced and create a visual illusion of circular movement. Repetition is a key element to successful radial balance, which is used mostly in commercial decorative patterns.

Figure 1-17 is an example of radial balance.
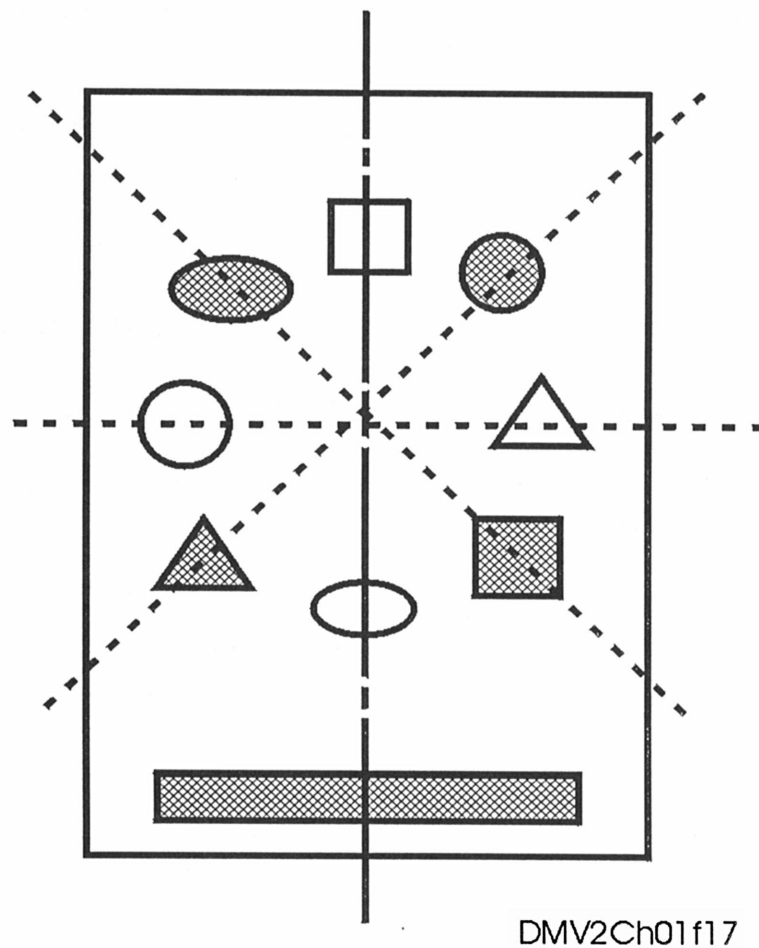
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Figure 1-17.—Radial balance.